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ABSTRACT

This report describes a program for improving reading skills of first graders. The targeted population consisted of a blue-collar community located in western Illinois. Many of the families had a language barrier. The problem of below grade level readers was documented through assessments and teacher observations. An examination of causes revealed that the first grade students did not know the letters of the alphabet and the corresponding sounds. Faculty reported students with little or no reading skills. After reviewing professional literature, a decision was made to focus on rhythm and rhyme to increase reading skills. Nursery rhymes in particular were used. Each week a new nursery rhyme was presented to increase the students' awareness of letters and sounds. One day the children sang and chanted the rhyme. The students acted out the rhyme on the next day. Pictures also were drawn by the students to show the main idea of the rhyme. Another day the students found rhyming words in the rhyme. The final day of the week was a review of all the activities. The results of the post intervention indicated that the use of nursery rhymes improved the students' knowledge of letters and letter sounds. The students also gained confidence in their reading ability. The students improved their one to one matching. More work can be done to improve the children's knowledge of letters and sounds. The children's beginning letter of their names can be highlighted and discussed. Alphabet book and books with playful words can also be used to increase letter and sound recognition. The most important strategy would be to use the children's own names to learn the letters and sounds. The reading survey is attached. (Contains 24 references and 2 figures of data.) (Author/RS)

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IMPROVING STUDENTS' LITERACY THROUGH THE USE OF RHYTHM AND RHYME

Nancy Rogers

An Action Research Project Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the

School of Education in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Teaching and Leadership

Saint Xavier University & SkyLight

Field-Based Master's Program

Chicago, Illinois

May 2003

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This report describes a program for improving reading skills of first graders. The targeted population consisted of a blue-collar community located in western Illinois. Many of the families had a language barrier. The problem of below grade level readers was documented through assessments and teacher observations.

An examination of causes revealed that the first grade students did not know the letters of the alphabet and the corresponding sounds. Faculty reported students with little or no reading skills.

After reviewing professional literature, a decision was made to focus on rhythm and rhyme to increase reading skills. Nursery rhymes in particular were used. Each week a new nursery rhyme was presented to increase the students' awareness of letters and sounds. One day the children sang and chanted the rhyme. The students acted out the rhyme on the next day. Pictures also were drawn by the students to show the main idea of the rhyme. Another day the students found rhyming words in the rhyme. The final day of the week was a review of all the activities.

The results of the post intervention indicated that the use of nursery rhymes improved the students' knowledge of letters and letter sounds. The students also gained confidence in their reading ability. The students improved their one to one matching. More work can be done to improve the children's knowledge of letters and sounds. The children's beginning letter of their names can be highlighted and discussed. Alphabet book and books with playful words can also be used to increase letter and sound recognition. The most important strategy would be to use the children's own names to learn the letters and sounds.

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CHAPTER 1

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

General Statement of the Problem

The students in the first grade class in an urban community exhibited a lack of appropriate literacy skills. This interfered with their ability to comprehend what they read. Evidence for the existence of this problem included a reading attitude survey, teacher observation, and informal assessments.

Local Context of the Problem

The targeted school was a one-story brick facility built in 1965-66. The building was in the shape of an "L." It had a gymnasium that was used for P.E.classes and also as a lunchroom. Recently, two additions were added to the school, four kindergarten rooms at one end of the building, and three fourth grade classrooms at the other end. The kindergarten and first grade classes were in one of the wings, while the second, third, and fourth grade classes were in the other wing. The fourth grade wing was attached to the adjoining middle school.

There were two learning disabilities classrooms, a behavior disorder classroom, an English as a second language classroom, a bilingual first grade and a bilingual

kindergarten classroom, a speech room, and two Title I classrooms. These rooms were interspersed throughout the building. The total number of classrooms was 27.

The current enrollment of this school was about 360 students in grades K through four. The enrollment of the district was stable.

The school had a 95.6% attendance rate and the chronic truancy was only 2%. The mobility of the school was 16.2%. The students' demographic makeup was 59.9 % White; 8.5 % Black; 29.1 % Hispanic; 0.8 % Asian Pacific; and 1.7 % Native American. The teachers' average experience in this district was 16.3 years. Forty-seven percent of the teachers in this district had bachelor's degrees. Fifty-three percent of the teachers in the district had master's degrees. The teacher's average salary was $48,000.

The school had four non-certified aides in the building. The aides helped in the library, the bilingual classes, the Behavior Disorder class, and in the nurse's office.

The reading curriculum in the school district was the Balanced Literacy program. It included a variety of materials, instructional strategies, and literacy experiences. The district developed independent, skilled readers through this program. The teaching of phonics was an integral part of the Balanced Literacy program. The components of the literacy block included guided reading, self-selected reading, word study, and writing.

The mathematics curriculum in the school district supported a program that allowed all students to become competent and efficient in using mathematics concepts, skills, and tools. Manipulatives were an important part of the math curriculum. Students were asked to reason and solve problems, and explain and justify their thinking.

The social studies curriculum in the school prepared students to become interested and knowledgeable about their communities. They developed an awareness of their

cultural, social and political heritage. Teachers and students focused on chronological thinking, historical comprehension, historical analysis and interpretation, and historic research.

The school had many accomplishments. The school had a partnership with a local junior college and the America Reads Program to provide a student teacher for reading. The Foundation in Reading computerized program was expanded at the primary level. A full time counselor served the needs of students. In-service was provided for the staff regarding the integration of the library program into the classroom curriculum. Other in-service trained teachers in the use of instructional strategies and collaborative thinking.

In addition to a bilingual kindergarten and a bilingual first grade, parent meetings had been held to service the needs of the Hispanic community. A partnership with a local church generated volunteers to work with the students. A luncheon was held at the end of the year to honor the volunteers.

A school-wide discipline plan was developed. Monthly rewards for students included trips to fast food places or extra recess time. A school-wide social skills program was implemented.

The school was concerned with students reading below grade level. The administrators and teachers would like 80% of their students to be reading at grade level. Another concern was the number of Hispanic students. Many students came from homes where very little or no English was spoken. The school also wanted its students to take pride in their ability to learn and contribute to the school. A social skills program was in the planning stage and eventually was implemented and coordinated within the daily curricular areas in all of the grade levels.

Community Context of the Problem

The community had a population of 20,333. There were 9,709 males and 10,624 females. The racial makeup was Whites, 80%; Blacks, 7.3 %; Hispanics, 15.2 % and Asians, 2.3%. The median age in this community was 34.9 in 1990.

The community was a blue-collar community. The city had a combination of residential, retail, commercial, and industrial interests. The community had taken the initiative to revitalize the business district along the waterfront. There were two major manufacturing industries in the community, one since 1837, and another since 1926. Layoffs at these factories had been a problem for this city. Other major businesses included a software company, a painting supplier, and a mechanical metal finishing and parts washing operation.

With a major river as a boundary, the community had many recreational opportunities. This allowed the community to take advantage of these opportunities and also was a great tourist draw. There were 120 acres of park land at 16 locations.

The community had two school districts: a high school district, and an elementary district. There were four elementary schools and one middle school included in the elementary district. These students, along with pupils from outlying elementary schools in small communities, attended the high school district. There was also a parochial elementary school in the community.

The community had seen some major setbacks in the recent past, but it was looking to the future with hope. The revitalization of businesses along the river was a major factor for the community.

National Context of the Problem

Promoting literacy has been a matter of concern for many years, but recently the subject has been of interest in national government and in offices of education in individual states. A high-ranking official in the Education department encouraged funding for Reading First(2002). This was a program designed to help every student become a successful reader by the end of third grade. This program was created through the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Secretary Paige said, "President Bush and I believe that reading is the foundation of all learning" (Press Release, Jan. 25, 2002).

Governor Ryan's Illinois Reads initiative made literacy a priority. One literacy activity was to encourage classes to read in special places in their communities and then submit drawings and essays to the Governor. The Governor said, "By making reading a priority, we are giving our children the tools they need to be productive and successful"(Illinois Reads, Feb.3,2002). The governor's goal was to make sure all children were reading well by the end of third grade.

Fountas and Pinnell (1996) conducted classroom research on early literacy and were strong advocates for literacy. They stressed outreach programs for parents of preschoolers, authentic reading and writing in kindergarten programs, and major literacy programs in first grade, continuing into second grade.

Cunningham and Allington (1994) promoted literacy. They were concerned with children who have a hard time learning to read. Some concrete examples they suggested for ways to increase literacy levels of all children were making words, doing shared readings and writings, using graphic organizers, and modeling strategies.

Literacy should begin at home with the parents as the teachers, but unfortunately, this is not always the case. Teachers of kindergarteners and first graders often spend a lot of time on emerging literacy activities. With the push from national and state leaders recently, literacy is again coming to the forefront in education.

CHAPTER 2

PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

Problem Evidence

The targeted group involved in this study consisted of four first graders who exhibited weak literacy skills. The evidence for this problem included lack of recognition on the student's part of the alphabet letters and their corresponding sounds. The targeted students had scores that ranged from 29 to 83 out of 100 points. These students also scored low in the literacy skill of segmentation of words. The scores ranged from 2 to 6 out of 10 points.

Teacher observations were used to gather evidence to document the students' progress. The targeted first graders lacked confidence in their knowledge of the letters and their corresponding sounds. They could not match print to speech all the time. The students hesitated when asked to give an answer and looked to the teacher to supply the answer. The first graders were also very fidgety and could not concentrate on the task.

In order to find out about student attitudes toward reading, a survey was given to the students. See Figure 1. All of the students liked to find out things for themselves. Half of the students liked to read books. The students were divided equally about

understanding what they read. Figuring out new words independently was hard for the targeted first graders.

This information indicated that the first graders were inquisitive and eager to learn. They wanted to be able to find out new things on their own. According to the survey, the students understood what they read. Unfortunately, this was not evident in the classroom. Half of the class had trouble figuring out new words. Many students did not know all their letters and sounds and they had difficulty breaking apart new words.

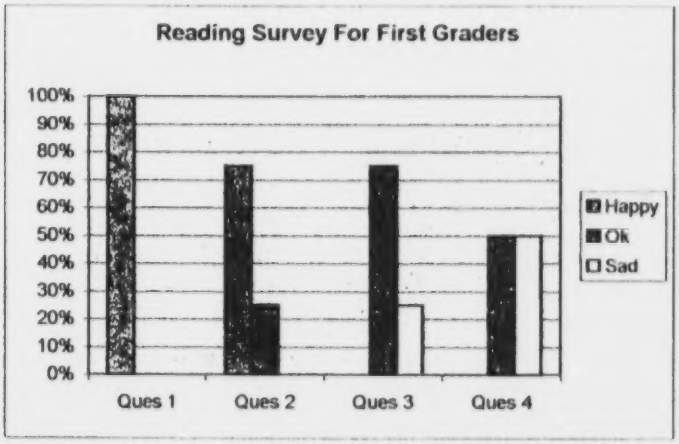

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Figure 1. Percent of responses on the reading survey for first graders

Question 1: I like to find things out for myself.
Question 2: I like to read books.
Question 3: I understand what I read.
Question 4: I try to figure out new words by myself.

Probable Causes

Many students lacked the necessary support to succeed in reading. Often both parents in the family worked so they were limited in the time they had to spend with their children. Of the four targeted students, only one of the mothers was a stay-at- home mother. Another mother was the only parent involved in the child's life. When parents were not at home to monitor their children's activities, homework and reading were often put aside. In addition, the viewing of television or playing computer and video games reduced the time children have to read.

One of the targeted students was from a home where English was not spoken or was limited. Sometimes parents were unable to help their children with homework or unable to read with their children because of the language barrier. According to the National Council of LaRaza (2002), "Hispanic educational attainment levels do not match those of their White and Black peers."(2002,p.1). Hispanics usually lag behind in the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The Committee on Education and the Workforce (2002) wrote "Disparities begin as early as kindergarten and remain through age 17" (p.2).

Another probable cause was the mobility of the students in the school. In the targeted district, the mobility was about 31%. The students in the targeted school had a mobility rate of 16%. Children who moved in and out of school often missed important reading skills, especially at the younger grades. Research showed that high mobility during the public school years often lowered student achievement. One national study of third grade students by the U.S.General Accounting Office in 1994 reported "that frequent school changes were associated with a host of problems, including nutrition and health

problems, below-grade-level reading scores, and retention"(Rumberger, 2002, p.1). High mobility produces changes in the classroom setting with students moving in and out of a class. More time may be spent reviewing materials for the new students. This may lead to fewer topics being covered in a school year (American Youth Policy Forum, 2002). This situation affected all students in the classroom.

Many of the students at the school did not have a strong support system at home. Many of the parents of children at school had to work long hours to make a living. Often there was only one parent at home. There was also a language barrier for some of the parents. The students at this school had a high mobility rate, moving from one school to another in the district or to another school district. The first grade students needed extra support as they progressed through the grades at school.

CHAPTER 3

THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

Literature Review

Some children struggled with reading skills and were reading below grade level. Many young students did not recognize all the letters of the alphabet and the corresponding sounds. It was imperative that children receive every opportunity to succeed in reading so that they experience success in school. Using the rhythm and rhyme of nursery rhymes to promoted awareness of letters and corresponding sounds was a hands-on activity for the students who lacked phonemic awareness.

"Phonemic awareness is the awareness that the speech stream consists of a sequence of sounds--specifically phonemes, the smallest unit of sound that makes a difference in communication"(Yopp & Yopp, 2000, p.1). The authors believed that phonemic awareness instruction should be incorporated into the classrooms. Teachers who have students with little exposure to the sound of language should concentrate mainly on rhyme, according to Yopp and Yopp.

According to Juel and Meier (1999), young readers profit from experiences that develop their phonemic awareness. Using oral activities in the classroom, such as jump rope rhymes and nursery rhymes, encourages students to listen to the

sounds of the letters and learn those sounds. The teacher can also point out the letters that make up the rhymes. This encourages spelling sound knowledge.

Fox (as cited in Improving Reading Strategies & Resources, 2002) said "Rhyming activities will benefit reading ability regardless of age or intelligence of the student" (p.86). Rhymes help children develop the understanding that different words can have the same sound at the end of the word. Phonograms can be used to introduce the concept of rhyming.

"The spontaneous disposition children have toward rhythm and melody makes music an ideal tool for assisting them with the interwoven facets of language: listening, speaking, reading, and writing" (Kolb, 1996, p.76-77). Kolb reported that rhythmic texts and music were closely related. Many rhymes and poems rely on steady beat and rhythm as a common focus. Children should be exposed to language experiences that help them hear sounds and rhythm.

Kolb encouraged singing a song repeatedly until the students are familiar with the lyrics and the tune. Seeing the words of the song in print is the next step. This is a good time to use echo and choral readings. Finally, the children should be exposed to the print to experience reading.

Langfit (1994) wrote "music is a powerful medium that educators can and should incorporate into their classrooms"(p.1). She also said young children need many different cues to get meaning from the print.

Towell (1999) reported that combining the elements of music and literature helped students in both areas. She said that using popular song lyrics as reading texts improved the students' success. Besides the usual cues used in

reading, Towell added a melody cue. She also suggested that the children create their own lyrics.

Harp (2000) agreed with this concept, noting that children's natural language usually included elements of rhythm and melody. He recommended that classrooms be filled with children singing favorite songs. Singing should not be done just in music class. When the children are comfortable with the lyrics and the tunes, they are then ready to see the song in print. Because they know the song, the children feel they are reading.

Butzlaff (2000) believed there is a connection between reading and music. "...when students learn lyrics of songs they may engage in reading written text. The lyrics of songs are often repetitive and hence predictable. It is possible that experience in reading such predictable text may train reading skills" (p.167).

Douglas and Willatts (1994) found evidence that listening to music can help children to read. They believed this was because the children heard the speech sounds. There is a relationship between rhythm performance in both reading and spelling.

In the article "Nursery Rhymes and Phonemic Awareness (2000), the author suggested that "hearing, learning, and reciting Mother Goose nursery rhymes can help young children take the first steps toward becoming proficient readers" (p. 1). These rhymes emphasized phonemic awareness. The children learned to identify rhyming words in the nursery rhymes. They listened for beginning sounds in a word. In addition, the children were exposed to social skills of singing in unison as a group.

Warren (2002) described the skills taught by using nursery rhymes. The skills included language, thinking, music, creativity, and self-esteem skills. Language skills included learning word endings. Rhymes helped with thinking skills such as recalling words from the rhymes. Music skills provided an interesting way to learn songs. Literature skills introduced children to go beyond nursery rhymes and find good literature to enjoy. Making up their own rhymes was a creative activity for young children. Finally, children were proud to recite nursery rhymes that they knew.

Stewart (2002) said nursery rhymes were full of rhythm and silly rhymes and the repetition in the words made it easy for the children to remember them. He said that most nursery rhymes are very easy to sing. The rhymes have a narrow note range. Stewart believes that the repetition in the rhymes builds children's memories.

The problem of struggling readers is a very serious one. This is a nationwide problem. All children should be given a chance to succeed in reading because it means they will be more likely to succeed in life. President Bush tried to address the problem with the "No Child Left Behind Act" (2002).

Solutions to help students read are available. Children and parents can read together. Reading favorite nursery rhymes over and over is a meaningful literacy activity. Singing the alphabet is fun for the children. At night, reading just a few pages of a favorite book to the child before going to bed is helpful.

As an intervention for struggling readers, the researcher used the rhythm and rhyme of nursery rhymes. The rhymes were enjoyable to read and were not too

long for the younger children. There were many literacy activities that could be used with the rhymes. Using a multi-sensory approach, the children echo read the nursery rhyme, acted out the nursery rhyme, clapped and snapped the nursery rhyme, pantomimed the nursery rhyme, drew a picture of the rhyme, and found the rhyming words in the nursery rhyme.

Each time a new nursery rhyme was introduced, a word in that rhyme beginning with a particular letter of the alphabet was highlighted. This word was discussed and used in context. Then, the word for the week was put on the Word Wall to highlight that beginning sound. All 26 letters of the alphabet were discussed during the lessons.

Many of the nursery rhyme books used in the class were filled with colorful illustrations of the Mother Goose rhymes. These delighted the children's imagination and sparked their interest in reading the rhymes.

Children have a love of rhythm and rhyme; using these rhymes was a way to get struggling readers involved. According to Cunningham and Allington (1994), "One of the best indicators of how well children will learn to read is their ability to recite nursery rhymes when they walk into kindergarten!" (p.141).

OBJECTIVE STATEMENT

As a result of increased instructional emphasis on rhythm and rhyme during the period of October 2002 through December 2002, the first grade students will increase their knowledge of alphabet letters and their corresponding sounds as measured by an ABC letter and sound assessment, observations, and a student survey.

Processes:

1. Develop a series of lesson plans using nursery rhymes.
2. Incorporate the lessons into the curriculum.
3. Establish a listening center using nursery rhymes.

ACTION PLAN

During each week of the twelve weeks of intervention, the teacher will present a rhyme a week. On Monday day of each week, a new rhyme is introduced. The rhyme is sung and chanted and the children work on the rhythm (Clapping beats and syllables).

On Tuesdays, the rhyme is acted out.

On Wednesdays, the children draw a picture of the nursery rhyme.

On Thursdays, we work together on finding the rhyming words in the rhyme.

On Friday we review the activities that were accomplished.

Nursery Rhymes:

Week1-Jack and Jill

Week 2-Rain Rain Go Away

Week 3-Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater

Week 4-Little Miss Muffet

Week 5-Jack be Nimble

Week 6-Higgelty-Piggelty, Pop

Week 7-Humpty Dumpty

Week 8-Hickory Dickory Dock

Week 9-One Two Buckle My Shoe

Week 10-Little Bo Peep

Week 11-Twinkle Twinkle Little Star

Week 12-Mary had a Little Lamb

Methods of Assessment

In order to assess the effects of the intervention, the students will be given an ABC test to see how many letters and sounds they recognize. The teacher will observe the students during guided activities.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT RESULTS

Historical Description of the Intervention

The first graders lacked appropriate literacy skills. This hindered their learning of the alphabet letters and sounds. Three sources of evidence of the problem included teacher observations, a student reading attitude survey, and informal assessments. The teachers were concerned with students who were reading below grade level. The goal of the school was to have 80% of its students reading at grade level.

The objective of this project was to improve the students' knowledge of the alphabet and the corresponding sounds. The researcher decided to use nursery rhymes as an intervention because children like the rhythm and rhyme of the nursery rhymes. The students in a first grade classroom who had the lowest scores on the alphabet and sound assessment were chosen for the intervention. The implementation of nursery rhymes was selected to effect the desired changes. Nursery rhymes were taught directly to a small group of four first graders. The group met for a half hour daily for a period of 12 weeks.

Each week a new nursery rhyme was introduced to the first graders. On the first day of the week, the teacher presented the nursery rhyme on a poster. She talked about special words in the rhyme and discussed capital letters and punctuation marks. The

students first echo read the rhyme after the teacher had read it. Then the teacher and the students choral read the rhyme. The children clapped to the beat and chanted the rhyme.

The second day involved a review of the previous day's lesson. Then the nursery rhyme was acted out. If there was only one character (person or animal) in the rhyme, each child had a chance to be that character. If there were several characters, the students took turns.

On the third day, the nursery rhyme was read and chanted again. Then the teacher asked the students what should be included in their drawing of the nursery rhyme. After a discussion, the children drew their pictures of the nursery rhyme.

The fourth day was rhyming day. Every week one word in each rhyme was used as an example of a rhyming word. The teacher asked the students to think of other words that rhymed with the specific rhyming word. These words were listed on a chart and kept in the room.

The fifth day was a review day. All the previous activities were reviewed. One new activity was using the Word Wall. Each week a word or several words were chosen from a nursery rhyme to represent that letter's sound. The children sat near the Word Wall and the chosen word was placed under the appropriate beginning letter. The children reviewed the words on the wall several times a week. This schedule was repeated each week of the intervention.

The only changes made to the action plan involved weeks with fewer than five days. Then the students did two days of lesson plans in one day. At the end of the action plan, the students were assessed again of their knowledge of letters and the corresponding

sounds. Using a graph, the students' letter and sound knowledge was presented. All students improved their letter-sound knowledge.

Presentation and Analysis of Results

In order to assess the effects of the use of nursery rhymes to learn the letters and letter sounds, the first graders completed an ABC test that they had also taken at the beginning of the Action Plan. One student moved unexpectedly before the final assessment. The other three students increased their knowledge of the upper case letters, the lower case letters, and the sounds of the letters.

One student knew all the upper case and lower case letters and 23 of the sounds. At the beginning of the intervention, he only knew 17 sounds. Another student increased her knowledge of the sounds from 4 to 19. She also recognized all the lower case and upper case letters. The final student increased her upper case letter knowledge from 10 to 21 and her lower case letter knowledge from 4 to 15. Her sound recognition began with one sound and finished with 13 sounds.

The teacher observed the first grade students throughout the intervention. She noticed that the students gained confidence as they read the poems. Their one-on-one matching improved considerably as they read and reread the rhymes. They enjoyed finding the correct word cards to put the nursery rhyme in proper sequence. However, not all the students could find the right word because they did not yet know all the letter sounds.

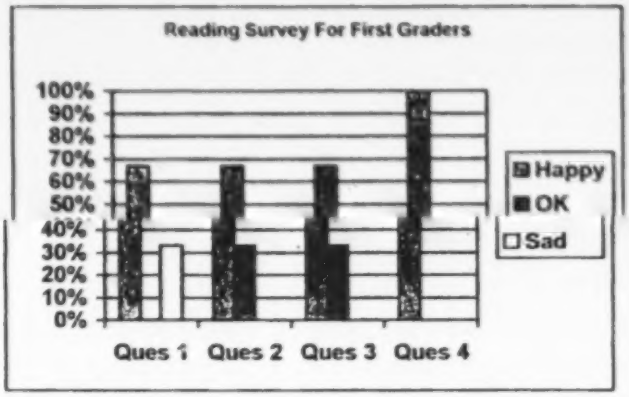

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Figure 2. Percent of responses on the reading survey for first graders

A reading survey that was given at the beginning of the action research was given to the students again. This time 67 % of the students liked to find out things for themselves. Sixty-seven percent of the students liked to read books. Thirty-three percent of the first graders understood what they had read. Finally, all of the students tried to figure out unknown words. This information seemed to indicate that that the students enjoyed reading books, but they did not understand what they were reading. While the students said they tried to figure out unknown words, it was not always evident in the classroom setting. (See Figure 2.)

Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the reading attitude surveys, teacher observations, and informal assessments, the first graders showed an improvement in their reading. The students' knowledge of letters and letter sounds increased. Their one-on-one matching improved, and their confidence about their ability to read improved. However, there was still a weakness in letter-sound recognition.

One recommendation to improve the children's knowledge of the sounds is to focus on each of the students' names. Children love to see their names in print. The letters and sounds in their names can be discussed, and their names clapped and chanted.

The sounds of the letters in the alphabet could be stressed even more during the daily activities in the class. Each day, the children would be asked to review the sounds and letters already presented. The teacher could send home a letter to parents with the child each week indicating the letter sound of that particular week and encouraging the parents to work on the sounds of the letters with their child.

Using books with playful sounds in the texts would draw attention to particular sounds. The books can be read and reread and the teacher can point out a certain sound. The teacher could ask what other words begin with that particular sound. The students could also predict the next sounds or words in a story. Alphabet books can also be used to reinforce the beginning sounds of the letters of the alphabet. There are many beautifully illustrated and creative alphabet books available.

The use of nursery rhymes is a good vehicle for children to use to gain knowledge of the letters and sounds. Children enjoy the rhythm and rhyme of the colorful nursery rhymes. Unfortunately, many young children are not being exposed to nursery rhymes. This is why it is important to continue to use nursery rhymes to teach letters and sounds.

"And while the great and wise decay,

And all their trophies pass away,

Some sudden thought, some careless rhyme,

Still floats above the wrecks of Time."

- Ib

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Appendix

READING SURVEY
For First Graders

Please draw a face to show how you feel about the following sentences.

If you feel this way often, draw

If you feel this way sometimes, draw

If you feel this way never, draw

1. I like to find things out for myself.

2. I like to read books.

3. I understand what I read.

4. I try to figure out new words by myself.

My favorite book is_____.

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